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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and implementation of the Practice-Based Professional Improvement Project, a teacher-led high school improvement project that has improved academic success at several inner-city high schools in Nashville, Tennessee. The project believes that: teachers are key to school improvement; most teachers sincerely want to strive to help student learn; and most teachers are informed, skilled professionals who want to improve their teaching. Teachers collaborate to identify their own goals for improving student learning, develop and implement plans to accomplish their goals, and assume responsibility for results. The project emphasizes school activities intended to meet teacher-identified school needs. A case study of the project's first 2.5 years included: data gathered by individual project participants, reflective journal entries, meeting notes, planning materials, and recorded observations of meetings and teaching; artifacts from and observations of teaching; student reactions and comments; samples of student work; student academic performance data; and written project plans and reports. Lessons learned include: teacher power, willingness, authority, and ownership are critical to success; implementing this project involved difficult cultural and locus-of-authority shifts; teacher and student working relationships are more important than project design; and teacher participation must be voluntary. (Contains 72 references.) (SM)

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A Study of the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project

Teachers Improving Their Own Practice

American Educational Research Association
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A Study of the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project

Teachers Improving Their Own Practice

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Introduction

This paper describes, explains, and analyzes the development, implementation, and continuing work of the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project, an experimental teacher-led high school improvement project that has raised the level of academic success of high-risk students at several inner-city high schools in the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, a large metropolitan school system in Tennessee. I designed and direct the project. I based the project on a concept of school improvement that I derived from ideas about learning, teaching, schools, and teacher professional learning that I have described in the book, *Re-Creating Schools: Places Where Everyone Learns and Likes It*, Corwin, 1998. The project has had its greatest success in high schools where most of the students come from predominantly poor and racial minority homes. It has now completed two full years of operation and the academic achievement gains that are reported are based on those two years, although third-year information is also discussed.

The primary purposes of this paper are

1) To describe and explain the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project -- the philosophical basis on which it operates, how it functions, and its successes and difficulties in terms of student learning and changes in teacher behavior; and

2) To suggest how the work and the results of the project can improve high school student learning, teaching, and teacher professional development generally and in other specific settings.

My objectives and purposes for the roundtable discussion that will focus on the paper are:

1) To seek and receive suggestions and critique about the project that is described;

2) To learn about parallel efforts being engaged in by rountable attendees;

3) To help attendees apply what is being learned from the project to schools with which they work; and

4) To begin a discussion-group network in which those who attend the session might continue the conversation.

Theoretical Framework and Underlying Assumptions

The Practice-based Professional Improvement Project is based on the following beliefs:

- That teachers are key to school improvement – that they are the most important

variable in determining what and how well students learn, are the most knowledgeable about the day-to-day classroom situations and school conditions within which they teach and their students learn, know their students better than others, and are the ones who must carry out any efforts at school and instructional improvement;

- That the vast majority of teachers sincerely want to do their best in helping their students learn and that, when teachers are unmotivated, frustrated, and discouraged, these negative feelings usually emerge from their belief that they are not able to succeed in helping their students as much as they hope; and

- That most teachers are informed, skilled professionals who can and want to improve their teaching.

So, the project asks teacher volunteers to engage in team efforts that identify their own goals for improving student learning, develop their own plans to accomplish their goals, implement their plans, and assume responsibility for the results of their efforts. Teachers decide what to do and they do the work. The project director and staff facilitator help them succeed.

The project focuses on the local activities within each school that are intended to meet that school's needs as identified by its teachers -- a cost-effective, "basic" approach to school and instructional change that is recommended by education reform leaders and supported by reform research. Each activity is teacher-selected, teacher-designed, and teacher-directed, and teachers accept responsibility for its successes and failures. Each activity is intentionally small-scale; requires little funding; and draws on local expertise, the guidance, advice and support of school-university collaborating participants, and the thinking of national reformers, researchers, and scholars.

The activities conducted in the schools are noticeably different from most instructional and school improvement projects in the following ways:

- They begin with the current conditions, strengths, weaknesses, and needs of specific groups of students and teachers.

- They rely on the knowledge of practice and competence of teachers themselves to improve their teaching and their students' learning rather than that of outsiders or supervisors unfamiliar with local conditions and less invested in local success.

- They place teachers in charge.

- They secure resources and support when, and only when, they are identified as needed by participating teachers.

- They hold participating teachers responsible and accountable for results, and the teachers, themselves, hold themselves similarly responsible.

The activities engage small voluntary groups of three or five teachers in the following sequences of tasks:

1) Identifying a specific teaching/student-learning improvement project to work on with their students over the course of about one year;

2) Developing a flexible plan, with clear objectives, to be pursued during the year;

3) Pursuing the plan with continuous monitoring and adjustments as needed; and

4) Periodic reporting of activity developments and progress to professional colleagues and school stakeholders.

The activities are guided by three fundamental questions that are addressed by each participating team of teachers; questions that the teams use to set their agenda, direct their work, and assess their progress. These questions are

- In what ways will the learning of the students who are the focus of this activity be improved?
- In what ways will our teaching and our learning about our teaching be improved?
- In what ways will the students and we teachers enjoy our work together more?

Accountability for project efforts and results are assessed by a fourth question, which is responded to by the teacher teams periodically during the school year:

- What can we report to the other teachers in this school and the school system at large that shows them what we and our students are doing and how well we are succeeding?

It is important to emphasize that the goals of the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project extend beyond specific types of improved student learning and improved teaching that occur in the course of a school year's set of activities. The goals also include an intention to change and update how teachers think about their professional work. Doing this involves four significant changes, changes in how teachers think about

1) How learning takes place,

2) The nature of teaching in the context of those newer ideas about learning,

3) The "community" nature of schools, and

4) Teacher professional development and learning.

The project hopes to instill in its teacher participants the following four conceptualizations:

1) Learning as experience-based, intellectual construction or meaning making,

2) Teaching as the professional practice of problem identification and problem solving,

3) Schools as morally based learning communities, and

4) Teacher development and learning as constructivist-oriented, continuous professional inquiry into practice.

Mode of Inquiry and Data Sources

This paper, in essence, reports on an ethnogaphically oriented case study of the first two and one-half years of the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project in Nashville (Tennessee) Public Schools.

Primary data sources include:

1) Data gathered and/or recorded by individual project participants -- teachers, project director, project facilitator, principals, other school and school system administrators -- reflective journal entries, notes taken at meetings, material generated in planning and teaching, recorded observations of meetings and teaching;

2) Artifacts from and observations of teaching;

3) High school student reactions and comments;

4) Samples of student work;

5) Student academic performance data; and

6) Written project plans and reports.

How Project Teams Functioned

In this section of this paper, I describe briefly how the Project functioned and what happened, in very general terms, during the first two years of operation. In order to avoid an excessively long paper, much descriptive detail has been left out. I can provide that detail in response to rountable attendee requests.

The project began in the spring of 1997. It has been a joint effort of the Center for the Support of Professional Practice in Educaation at Vanderbilt University, Peabody College and the Department of Instruction and Administration Grade 9 through Adults of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. I, a Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Peabody College, and James Turbeville, High School Director of Metro Schools represent our respective entities in the project.

The methodology used by the project facilitation team has been to approach local school teacher teams with the challenge to identify responses to three basic questions:

1. What would you want to do to improve the learning of the students you teach?

2. What would you want to do to improve your teaching and your learning about teaching?

3. What would you want to do to make your students' learning and your teaching more enjoyable?

Five Metropolitan Nashville high schools were involved in the project during its first year, 1997-1998. Principals of the five schools were invited to nominate teams of teachers to participate. The

invitation informed the principals that the project would involve unemcumbered teacher decision-making in view of the fact that one of the premises underlying the project was that teachers, know best how to teach and enable good student learning. Five teams of three to five teachers one team from each school, met during the spring to decide if they wanted to anticipate and to draft their goals and project plan. At the end of the spring, all five teams agreed to participate. During the spring planning meetings, several underlying premises were developed by four of the five teams that quickly became "necessary conditions" for the operation of their projects:

- Improved student learning was the primary goal and direct focus of their projects
- Each school team would have common daily planning time.
- The students whose learning was each team's focus would be scheduled as a cohort.
- Team teachers would share teaching the cohort.

Foci selected by each teacher team for the first year were as follows:

- The team in School A, the one team that did not focus directly on student learning, chose to develop and implement a peer mentoring system.
- The team in School B chose to try to raise the academic level of honors and Advanced Placement classes for college preparatory students.
- The team in School C chose to refine and replicate already existing team approaches to teaching ninth-grade very high-risk students, which was based in a middle school type of school-within-a-school clustering of students and teachers.
- The team in School D chose to use an existing school-to-work program as a spring board to improving academic learning for hard-to-reach students.
- The team in School E developed and implemented a contract-with-students academic program for at-risk tenth-grade students, which they entitled "Guaranteed Success Program."

Each school team met with the project director and project facilitator during the inservice days prior to students returning to school in the fall to finalize plans to begin their project for the school year, and all five school teams met with the facilitation team at least biweekly throughout the fall semester. By design, each team was responsible for establishing and pursuing its focus and direction. Teams were free to modify or change their objectives as long as the modification remained true to the three questions initially raised of them.

At mid-year 1997-1998, two of the teams were floundering, two were making gradual progress, and one was succeeding noticeably. More specifically,

- The team in School A had not yet been able to develop a mentoring program although its three teachers had good intensions and devoted serious thought and energy to the effort. Reasons for the lack of progress included:

  — The project focus was not tied directly to student learning.

— It required commitment from many teachers not on the team.

— The culture of the school encouraged independent teacher action rather than collaboration.

— The school's principal was noticeably a top-down, I'm-in-charge administrator, even though she claimed otherwise.

— Only one of the three teachers on the team seemed to be committed to the project's goals and agenda; the other two seemed willing only to "go along" with his lead.

— One of the three team members went on maternity leave at mid-year.

- The team in School B had not been able to implement its plan because the principal did not arrange the school schedule for either cohort assignments of students or common planning time for teachers. She explained, "I screwed up, I'm sorry."

- The team in School C was continuing the success of the program for high-risk ninth-grade students with a new class of ninth graders, but they were not directing any significant attention to spreading the approach to other potential teams.

- The team in School D was making progress in devising a plan for devoting more attention to academic achievement for the students in the school-to-work program, but the program had not yet been changed significantly, partly because the students were not organized into precisely defined cohorts. (Most of the targeted students shared common classes taught by the teacher team but they some were scattered among other classes and some had some classes with non-team-member teachers.)

- The team in school E was succeeding noticeably and well. Student grades were improving, their absentee rates were dropping, more students were doing their assignments, and students were following the project-imposed "dress-for-success" clothing guidelines. Students were identifying with the "Guaranteed Success Program" to the point that they designed a logo, talked about having identifying T-shirts made, and asked if the program would be implemented for next year in grade eleven so they could continue to participate.

By the end of the 1997-1998 school year the amount of success and non-success for each team was as follows:

- The team in School A stopped meeting and for all intents and purposes no longer functioned. I and the project facilitator chose not to recommend continuing the project in that school, although we did agree to help the team leader in his effort to establish a charter school.

- The team in School B gave up trying to accomplish its goals for the first year and started to lay a foundation for the next year, including seeeking the principal's assurance that the scheduling needed for the plan's success could be arranged.

- The team in School C recognized that their pre-project arrangement for their own group of high-risk ninth-grade students had succeeded again, but that they had not done much to extent the concept to other teacher teams. They decided that they preferred to work the next year only within their own team because they felt their own students' needs required all the energies they could devote to their work.

- The team in School D considered their work for the first year to be a combination of experimental trial and error and planning for year two. They decided upon a plan to "get serious about academics" for year two and divided into two sub-teams: one for grade ten and a second for grade eleven.

- The team in School E experienced a triumphant-level success. The four teachers had bonded as a team. The students identified with their fellow "Guaranteed Success" classmates. Absentee rates dropped and all of the 24 students who remained in the program at the end of the school year passed all three subjects: English, algebra, and biology.

  More specifically, of the 31 tenth-grade students who started in the project, three transferred out of the school during the year, one was dismissed from the project because of being suspended from school, three were dropped from the project because they were absent from school more than ten days. (Both the suspensions and the excessive absences constituted the breaking of the Student Contract, which the students, their parents, and teachers signed at the start of the school year.) Of the 24 who passed all three subjects, 23 actually earned passing grades in all three subjects, and one earned passing grades in English and biology. He was passed in algebra even though his actual final grade fell two points below passing because he fulfilled all conditions of the "Guaranteed Success" contract. The passing rate is particularly significant in light of two facts: The same students had a 44% failure rate in their courses a year earlier; and the students taught by the three project team teachers in their non-project classes during 1997-1998 failed at a rate above 40%. The teachers, students, and the school principal all attributed the improved academics to participation in the project.

During the summer of 1998, I and the project faciliator decided not to try to re-initiate any team activity at two of the project school sites. School A was dropped because we felt that the original focus on teacher peer mentoring was too removed from student learning, the school was a very select academic magnet school and we wanted to focus more on needs of high-risk students, we found no faculty volunteers for a second year, and we saw little interest on the part of the "top-down-style" principal to continue. School C was dropped because the initial team felt they could continue their self-contained program for high-risk ninth-grade students without external support, they did not want to assume the responsibility of helping other teachers replicate their program, and the entire school moved to a new building where its student body increased in number by 50%. The over-all school atmosphere was not condusive to instructional experimentation in light of all the other changes that were about to occur with the move.

The most successful school site, School E, continued in the project but at grade eleven rather than at grade ten. This meant that different teachers constituted a new team, although 19 of the previous-year 24 tenth-grade students continued to participate as eleventh-grade students.

So, the second year began with teams in three schools: Schools B, D and E. All teams had made plans for the new year during the previous spring and developed them during the summer and in

pre-opening-of-school inservice workshop sessions. The teacher teams in School B and D were essentially the same as in the first year, but the team in School E consisted of three new teachers and one holdover from 1997-1998.

During the 1998-1999 school year, the amount of success and non-success of the three teams was as follows:

- At School B the project ended almost as soon as the school year started because the principal, contrary to her promises and assurances, for the second time did not schedule the students in cohorts or the teachers with common planning time. The teachers tried to rearrange schedules during the first few days of school but gave up in frustration. The project facilitator and I became convinced that the principal would not allow the teachers to manage their own project, so we withdrew from the school.

- At School D the project teachers divided into two sub-teams, one for tenth grade and a second for eleventh grade. They adopted with a few adjustments the "Guaranteed Success Program" plan developed the previous year by School E, and applied it at both grade levels as the "Excel Program." Both grade level efforts evolved successfully through 1998-1999 in ways comparable to year one in "Guaranteed Success." Student pass rates and attendance rose over the previous year and the students and teachers identified noticeably as Excel Program participants. In essence, the "Guaranteed Success Program" was replicated in two versions at School D.

- At School E the new team pursued the "Guaranteed Success" idea and plan much as the program was designed and implemented in 1997-1998 by their predecessor tenth-grade teacher team. But the new team lacked both the enthusiasm and ownership that the first-year team exhibited. By the end of the 1998-1999 year, the 19 students as a whole were continuing their academic successes, but, as one student described the situation, "It doesn't really feel like the Guaranteed Success Program of last year." The teachers on the team agreed with this type of assessment and suggested that the program not continue with the same students as they moved into twelfth grade. Their reasoning included the belief that 18 of the 19 students were no longer at risk. The principal suggested that a new team of teachers be recruited to start a new program for 1999-2000 with entering high-risk ninth-grade students.

Lessons Learned

After two full years of project operation and several months of additional experience in year three, the following observations and conclusions can be offered:

- The basic understandings and assumptions about learning, teaching, schools as learning communities, and teacher development and learning that are identified in the book, *Re-creating Schools*, can guide a school improvement project like the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project, but close adherence to those ideas is critical for success. Pressures to compromise must be overcome.

- Teacher power and authority over the project, teacher willingness to exercise that authority, and teacher sense of ownership of the project and its results are critical.

- Implementing a project such as the Practice-based Professional Improvement Project involves cultural and locus-of-authority shifts that are difficult to initiate and implement. Those in authority, especially principals, must stand aside and allow the shifts to occur and, at the same time, be supportive. Teachers must grow into their new leadership roles.

- Implementing such a project takes time, requires nurturing, needs an "outsider," non-authority person to help project participants along, and needs to be provided protection from outside bureaucratic and accountability demands.

- Teacher (and student) working relationships are more important than the specific project design or plan. The teachers need to be free to make modificatiions wherever modifications appear to be warranted.

- Teacher participation must be voluntary.

- Care must be taken constantly to remind everyone that the goal of a project such as this is to develop and sustain a culture of teacher leadership and ownership in a school, rather than to pursue a specific project plan as a solution to current (and possibly fleeting) problems.

- The core of such a project is in its people, their work, and their relationships, not in a project design, plan, structure, or curriculum. Transfer from one faculty group and setting to another is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Up-scaling is not possible. Each project team needs to begin at its own beginning point, in its own context, and with its own personal frame of reference, and motivations.

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